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ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE ON THE TEACHING OF ELEMENTARY ECONOMICS

E. L. BOGART, *Chairman*

The Round Table on Wednesday afternoon on the Teaching of Elementary Economics was attended by a large gathering. In this meeting the first four speakers presented, in an informal way, remarks which they had been asked in advance to prepare. After these set speeches there was a general discussion. The following summary is based upon notes taken by the chairman.

H. L. LUTZ, Oberlin, spoke of the aims and objectives of the course in elementary economics. These appear to depend largely upon the character of the course to be taught, and the previous training and background of the students themselves. Professor Lutz stated as his conclusion, after some years of observation, that the students are not ready to undertake the study of elementary economics, using such a text as Taussig's *Principles*, before the Sophomore year.

For such students as he had come in contact with he found the following propositions to be true: (1) They lack, generally speaking, the background of knowledge of the details of our fundamental economic processes, and of the structure of modern industrial society. This is a new world to many of them, in which even the terms and concepts so familiar to us are foreign to their previous experience. (2) Most of these students do not intend to become specialists in the subject. Their principal interests are elsewhere, and they are taking one or more courses in economics as a part of a well-rounded education. (3) Whatever their special interests may be in college or in after life, they have discovered that they must of necessity become citizens, and must look forward to assuming their part of the responsibilities that accompany this privilege.

Having in mind these needs of the students whom we are called upon to teach, we may discern at least three principal objectives of the course: (1) The course must be sufficiently concrete and descriptive to give the student some familiarity with our economic institutions, as well as with the terms and concepts of the science. (2) The student must be trained, as well as may be, in the method and the character of economic reasoning. These are in such marked contrast with the exact reasoning and rigid proof of the sciences which he has hitherto studied that he is likely, at first, to be skeptical of the results which we reach. Economics, properly taught, becomes an excellent discipline in the development of judgment. (3) The end and goal of all our teaching must be the development of better citizens. The

teaching of economics, therefore, must contribute to this end or it fails in its highest purpose.

H. T. COLLINGS, University of Pennsylvania, discussed briefly the "Content of the Course" in elementary economics, as given in the Wharton School. The course in elementary economics is taken by Freshmen. The class of about 1000 is divided into three groups of from 300 to 350 for lecture purposes—one hour per week. The students, divided into 35 recitation sections, meet twice a week under the direction of nine instructors. The work, therefore, consists of one hour of lecture and two hours of recitation each week throughout the year.

A different text is used each year in order to avoid getting into ruts in questions and examinations. In addition to this book supplementary texts are used, of each of which there are about 100 copies in the Library. From these are assigned ten to thirty pages per week, according as the material in them fits in with the subject under discussion. Besides this the students are given each week from one to fifteen pages of mimeographed material taken from newspapers, magazines, or other texts, with a view to making the course more interesting by presenting material concerning present day economic problems. There are also mimeographed each week from ten to twenty questions dealing with the lecture, the class text, or the supplementary readings. These questions in the hands of the students form the basis for much of the class discussion.

The content of both lecture and recitation is governed largely by the method of approach. Economics is regarded as the science of business, and its principles are approached from the business point of view, thus emphasis is laid upon the business side rather than upon the sociological or psychological.

The lecture each week deals with a single subject such as land, money, profits, etc., even though the text used may not treat such topics separately and specifically. The subject is considered under three or four subheads, each of which deals with some principle relative to the matter in hand. These subheads are expanded by the presentation of business phenomena, particularly illustrating the various phases of the subject. At the close of the term a mimeographed sheet is placed in the hands of each student, giving each of the subjects in the order of presentation, together with an indication of all assignments in texts and supplementary material, so that the student may have before him an outline of the content of the course and may see the relation of each subject considered to such general fields as production, exchange, and distribution.

Less need be said with reference to the content of the recitation. The endeavor in the two recitation hours each week is to encourage

the students to discuss the basic principles, to see their application in business, and to understand their connection with business life. The recitation endeavors to avoid controversial matter; hair-splitting distinctions are omitted since it is believed that these have no place in an introductory course.

The entire content of the course is so organized that all sections have the same lecture, the same text assignments, and the same supplementary material and questions each week. All classes, too, take the same examination at the end of the month and at the end of the term. So much uniformity seems necessary with a large group of students taught by nine or ten different instructors. It should be added, however, that beyond this uniformity of content the teaching in the various sections is entirely individual. In the Wharton School, therefore, the aim is to use the combined knowledge to make a uniform course as far as its content is concerned, but each instructor is left entirely free to present this material in the way which his training and personality dictate.

C. O. RUGGLES, Ohio State University, in discussing the teaching of the elementary course said that it is advantageous to consider, first, the place of the study in the curriculum; second, the content of the course; and third, the method of teaching.

It would appear, he said, that we have reached a point where we ought to give some work in elementary economics in the Freshman year. Indeed if we are to have voters practicing in the field of applied economics, it will be necessary to introduce some study of elementary economics into the secondary schools. This does not mean that we are to take what has been recognized as a proper course for college Sophomores and give it to Freshmen and to those in the secondary schools. But it does mean that students of economics ought to be giving serious consideration to the preparation of materials that will be suitable for the secondary schools and for college Freshmen.

It is sometimes urged that the elementary course should not attempt to cover so many topics; that a more intensive study of some phases of the subject would be better. This would be a very good plan if all students were to take the advanced courses. If there is to be a course in the Freshman year it might be possible to make some reorganization of the work so as to give a more general survey in the Freshman year, followed by a more intensive course in the Sophomore year. But if nothing is given in the Freshman year, the course for Sophomores should not be too limited in scope. Too many college students drop out before they become Juniors, and the curriculum ought to be so arranged that a student will have had a course furnishing him an introduction to the general field of economics by the time he has had two years in college. If it is necessary now to apologize for suggest-

ing that a student ought possibly to have work in the principles of economics both in the Freshman and Sophomore years, it will not be necessary much longer.

As to the method of teaching the elementary course, it would appear from our experience, especially in recent years with very large classes, that the lecture method is of very little value. It may, however, be advantageous to have class schedules arranged so that all students taking the elementary course can be called together at the same hour for uniform examinations. If the reply is made that it is expensive to handle large elementary classes in small sections, it ought to be appreciated that educational institutions now spend large amounts for equipment, instructors, and laboratory assistants in science, and therefore those responsible for results in the field of the social sciences may insist on a sufficient amount of individual work on the part of students taking the course to accomplish satisfactory results.

It would appear, too, that the very large numbers now taking elementary economics should give opportunity to select, through intelligence tests, the students who can be given a course much more difficult than can be given to all students. This is particularly important in state universities where students from some of the colleges are required to take the work while those from other colleges may elect it. Any one who has had experience with alphabetical sections of a thousand such students will doubtless feel that there is something of promise in the plan here suggested.

The social significance of the study of elementary economics justifies careful consideration of the possibilities of its introduction even into secondary education and warrants the demand for sufficient funds to offer it in a satisfactory manner in our universities.

Professor E. E. DAY, Harvard, referring to Professor Ruggles' suggestion that students in the elementary course be classified on the basis of some sort of intelligence test, and assigned to sections accordingly, first spoke briefly regarding the special sections which are organized in the elementary course at Harvard. For six or seven years it has been the practice, he said, to segregate toward the end of the first semester the men whose records have indicated that they have a reasonable chance of obtaining a final "A" (highest grade) in the course. These twenty-odd best men have been placed in a separate section, in the conduct of which there has been full recognition of the unusual capacity of the men. From time to time during the year additional men are transferred to this special section as they show that they have a chance of obtaining a final "A". Toward the end of the year the section sometimes enrolls as many as thirty men. In view of the character of the section it has been possible to work much more rapidly through the easier material and to devote the bulk of

the time to the more difficult portions of the work. Furthermore, weekly tests which are given in the other sections have been largely given up in this special, so-called "AA" section. The plan has worked admirably from the start. It not only gives the men in the special section instruction much better adapted to their needs, but stimulates interest among a large number of the better men in the course who definitely seek to make the "AA" section.

In one year a similar plan was adopted for the twenty-five poorest men who survived the mid-year examination. In this section, as in the other, special methods of instruction were adopted and found to be more effective than those employed for the customary section. The plan undoubtedly obtained results in enabling a number of men to pass the course who otherwise would have failed, but after careful consideration of the whole experiment it was judged to be an uneconomic use of the Department's resources and the special section has never again been adopted for low-grade men. Professor Day seemed to think that excellent results are to be obtained from a moderate amount of classification and segregation at the top, but that the principle cannot profitably be extended to include all students enrolled in the elementary course.

Some difference of opinion having appeared regarding the proper place of the elementary course in the collegiate curriculum, Professor Day ventured to suggest that the experience at Harvard has seemed to demonstrate unmistakably that college men do a better grade of work in elementary economic principles, and obtain distinctly more from the instruction, after having had a full year of college work. This does not mean that the elementary course cannot be profitably taken by first-year college students; but where it is safe to assume that the students will elect the subject as freely in their second year as in their first, it seems preferable for them to defer taking the course until their second year, particularly if the course can follow systematic instruction in more general social science during the first year. It is certainly to be hoped that effective instruction in social science can be worked back into the earlier years of the educational system. Professor Day was of the opinion that an attempt should be made to carry social studies back at least to the start of secondary school work. This does not imply, that deferment of the work in elementary principles is not desirable in the organization of the *college* curriculum. In Professor Day's judgment the course in elementary economics is placed better in the Sophomore, than in the Freshman, year.

Professor Day devoted the major part of his time to strong recommendation of experiment with the case or problem method in the teaching of elementary economics. He warned against any confusion between the case, or problem, method and the use of books of selected ma-

terials. As an illustration of case or problem work he outlined a problem in the determination of competitive value with special reference to the influence of cost of production. The illustrative problem had to do particularly with an application addressed to the Federal Trade Commission in 1919 by the Western Association of Rolled Steel Consumers for a complaint against the United States Steel Corporation and certain independent companies because of the common practice of quoting steel prices throughout the country on the basis of the prevailing Pittsburgh price, plus an amount equal to the freight on the products from Pittsburgh to the point of destination. Professor Day indicated how such a concrete case might be made the basis of a discussion of important economic factors and their interaction in the determination of market price. In his judgment such a case might be made to lend much greater concreteness to abstract economic principles. Furthermore, the method has the great merit of connecting the classroom work with the known and ascertainable interests of the typical undergraduate. It was Professor Day's idea that, in the solution of the problems, students should have the use of standard texts and of a considerable amount of supplementary material. The method would differ fundamentally from the customary use of the standard text in that instruction would center about the solution of a problem placed in the hands of students, with no advance class-room indication of the correct solution. Undoubtedly, the collection of satisfactory case material is a laborious and expensive undertaking, but an abundance of material exists in the reports of various public commissions, labor adjustment boards, tax authorities, trade associations, and less formal agencies. While it may not be feasible to introduce the method in full in any particular course, it was Professor Day's opinion that systematic trial of the method should be undertaken as early as possible and the effects of the change in method carefully examined and, if possible, measured.

H. D. DOZIER, Dartmouth College, stated that it was the practice in Dartmouth to give Freshmen a preparatory course in economics and then in the Sophomore year to give them a course in the principles. The Freshmen are given a course in citizenship as a foundational course upon which the more advanced courses in all the social sciences are based. He then asked Mr. Graham, who taught this course last year at Dartmouth, to explain it more fully.

FRANK D. GRAHAM, Dartmouth College, stated that the course in Citizenship had been started the previous year as an experiment, but that it had worked very well and had served to stimulate the interest of the students. The problem method was followed and an effort made to present to the students live issues, approaching them from the standpoint of good citizenship. Last year they had taken up in

class the issues presented in the presidential campaign, and had used material from newspapers and magazines which dealt with this subject. The steel strike, in its various aspects, had also been used as the basis of discussions, and had served to introduce many economic principles.

MR. J. L. McCASKEY, mechanical engineer, Westinghouse Electrical and Manufacturing Company, Pittsburgh, made a plea for the teaching of economics as the best possible training in citizenship. There is a strong demand for training in this subject on the part of people who do not have the opportunity to attend college. The plan was tried in the Westinghouse Company of having the workingmen participate in the management, but it was soon discovered that the delegates of the workingmen knew no economics and did not understand the problems presented. They were told that they should study this subject, but they could not be persuaded to go to the Carnegie Institute of Technology or to the University of Pittsburgh or to lectures given by men in these institutions. It therefore became necessary to give instruction in economics to the men in the plant. This has been done by the construction of a large wall screen on rollers, on which were presented by means of charts and graphs and other devices the important economic facts of production, exchange, and distribution. It was found that by this method even the illiterate men in the plant were able to understand the material presented, and that all took a great interest in the course.

J. B. THOMPSON, Maryland, State College, stated that at his institution they had to teach not only business students, as was true of the University of Pennsylvania, but students from every school in the college, and that, therefore, the principles of economics must be presented from the social standpoint rather than from the business standpoint. The great difficulty which they had experienced in teaching large elementary classes was that of checking up the work and keeping the students busy. In order to do that they gave short bi-weekly tests in which a student would be asked to write for perhaps ten minutes on some one question covered by the day's assignment. He also advocated the giving out of problem questions by the lecturer, which might be dictated, for the students to answer. Written quizzes of not more than fifteen minutes were later given in which four questions of those given out were to be answered. The student would usually write not more than one sheet, which could be easily read and graded by the instructor. As to the problem method, he thought there was great difficulty in obtaining problems that were interesting to all the students.

D. T. CLARK, Williams College, spoke of the problem method of instruction. He stated that Professor Day had anticipated the chief objection to the problem or case method by saying that a systematic

treatise on economics was to be placed in the hands of the students and that they were required to consult it fully. Without some such guide the student would be apt to flounder. The subject of economics is a most important one in a democracy, as an understanding of its principles is an essential condition to good citizenship. Since many students never go to college, the subject should be taught in the high schools and even, he thought, in the grade schools. So far as the teaching of economics in college is concerned, he agreed with Professor Day that the Sophomores would understand this abstract, philosophical subject better than Freshmen. Just where the course should be placed in a student's curriculum would, however, depend upon how much time he could give to the subject. In Williams College, it was formerly given to Juniors, but in the last two or three years it had been offered as a Sophomore subject. Before he concluded, Mr. Clark said that he would like to address questions to two of the previous speakers. Of Professor Collings he wished to ask whether the aim at the University of Pennsylvania was to study business from the social standpoint. He agreed with Mr. McCaskey that economics should be taught to workingmen, but of him he wished to ask what kind of economics they taught to workingmen.

Professor Collings stated, in reply to Professor Clark's question, that at the Wharton School they taught welfare and not price economics. Since the students had four years of work in this field, however, many of the courses which they took were technical or semi-professional.

Mr. McCaskey stated that the aim of the instruction given by the Westinghouse Company was to develop better citizens and also to acquaint the men with business conditions. He believed that knowledge of economic principles tended to the development of a higher civilization. They had found that a full explanation of the processes of production made the men understand the economic loss involved in restriction of output. He thought that the course acted as an antidote to socialism.

FRANCIS TYSON, University of Pittsburgh, said that the previous year his department had adopted at Pittsburgh a two-year plan for the teaching of elementary economics, of which the first year embraced commercial geography and economic history and the second year a course in the principles. In this way they provided the student first with a background and with a foundation of industrial facts. During the previous summer there had been a reorganization of the economics courses and at present they are experimenting with a new course. This is a gateway course called Human Progress, which gives a survey of most of the economic progress down to the present time. It was found that this course heightened the interest of the students and he

believed that it would prove a valuable introduction to the course in the principles of economics. The course was given to the Freshmen and they had found it desirable to have a so-called Director of Freshmen to hold conferences with the students for the purpose of illuminating the course. In conclusion, he hoped that a plan might be devised by which the teachers in different institutions could pool their experiences and exchange material used in conducting the courses in elementary economics.

Professor Day replied to this that he had talked of the matter of coöperative action in the way of getting out problem material or of exchanging experiences with Dean L. C. Marshall of the University of Chicago, and they agreed that the matter called for joint action. In order to assist this movement, the *Journal of Political Economy* planned to publish some sample case material, but he feared that such a method, desirable as it was, would not accomplish the desired purpose in a reasonable time. If such coöperative work is to be undertaken along these lines, it needs the appointment of a committee to organize it and guide it through.

Professor Ruggles stated that at the Cleveland meeting of the National Education Association a plan had been arranged by which teachers in the secondary schools can exchange classroom material. Any such plan must, however, be organized on a comprehensive scale if it is to be efficient.